

THE AUSTRALIAN

‘We can, through education, drive rates of sexual offending down’

How to teach kids about consent and respectful relationships? Start when they’re very young, says this senior Canberra-based prosecutor of sexual offenders.

By REBECCA URBAN

From **The Weekend Australian Magazine** June 5, 2021

15 MINUTE READ •  141

The Year 3 students sit in pairs, reading cards in hands, mulling over a range of social scenarios. “You ask your friend if you could sleep in her bed during a sleepover,” one child asks, reading from the printed card. “What would your answer be?” Her partner pauses to think. “No thanks,

it's a bit squishy. I like my space at night," comes the reply. "Your friend wants to hold your hand but you don't want to," is the next dilemma. "I wouldn't feel comfortable, no thanks," insists one of the children. Her partner, trying to put - herself in the shoes of the other party, shrugs her shoulders. "That's OK. We will just walk without holding hands."

As Katrina Marson, a senior Canberra-based prosecutor, watched this role-playing inside a school classroom in the UK, she was struck by the students' curiosity and eagerness to consider how they might respond to the various situations. In another class she saw educators skilfully defuse the giggling that the words penis and vagina tend to elicit from kids. "Remember, we have our science hats on. These are just scientific words," students are told. "Nose, chin, elbow, knee, penis, vagina. These are just the names of those body parts."

One primary classroom had a bookshelf at the back of the room, with the books arranged by genre, including a space for age-appropriate titles about relationships and sex. "It was common for children to select books from this shelf for their independent reading time," Marson says. "There was no shame. Nobody was teased."

These children don't know it, but the lessons about their bodies, personal boundaries, consent and respecting others are aimed at setting them up with the skills they will need in years to come when life's questions become more complex and the stakes significantly higher.

As the issue of sexual violence dominates public debate across the nation, with allegations of sexual assault, harassment and misconduct spanning the corridors of power in Canberra, workplaces, schools and teenage parties, calls for action have inevitably landed on the education system: Are schools doing enough to teach young people about respect and consent? It's not the entire answer but schools are a solid start, says Marson: consistent, age-appropriate lessons on relationships and sex education that start when children are young, and that scale up as they mature.

Marson works in the sexual offences unit of the ACT office of the Director of Public Prosecutions. As an arts/law student at the Australian National University she based her honours thesis around the argument that preventative education methods were more effective at reducing unwanted sexual experiences for young people than the criminal justice system. Despite this, she became a prosecutor and for the past eight years has been listening to victims recount horrific stories of assault as they fight for redress before the courts. “There are cases that make you cry; cases where, the faces of the victims, you just can’t forget,” the 31-year-old says. “You can try to offer victims a sense of autonomy in the justice process, you can try to offer them a sense of closure, and give them an opportunity to use their voice, but you can never reach back and undo what happened to them.”

A year-long secondment to Legal Aid, which saw the young lawyer switch sides to defend those accused of sexual crimes, further piqued her interest in prevention. It was that one burning question from her university days – how can we stop these crimes from happening in the first place? – that prompted Marson to apply for a Churchill Fellowship, which led to her travels to the UK, Europe and North America throughout 2019. She says the most effective “relationships and sex education”, known as RSE, starts when children are very young: “We don’t teach small children algebra first, we start with numbers. Relationships and sex education is the same, we have to get the right building blocks in place – learning about bodily autonomy, communication skills, expressing how you feel – well before we get to the point where we are discussing issues like sexual relationships and sexual consent.”

In many other nations, particularly throughout Europe, RSE and violence prevention is primarily viewed as a public health matter, with health departments taking charge and recruiting the education sector, as well as other stakeholders, to assist with service delivery. In Australia, it is largely left up to the education system. While some states – such as Victoria – mandate the teaching of respectful relationships and sexual consent, others leave it up to individual schools to decide

what and how to teach. And, as recent events show, many appear to be fumbling in the dark.

The head of private co-educational Wesley College in Melbourne is holding a press conference. It's a March day that will be burnt into the school's history. More than a dozen girls have come forward with allegations of sexism, sexual harassment and assault and the school has been embarrassed by the emergence of a sexist TikTok video featuring students. Ashen-faced principal Nick Evans concedes his previously held view of school culture, one that was "warm, respectful and based on a sense of equality", has been shaken.

It's an extraordinary admission. The well-resourced school, with fees of up to \$35,000 a year, prides itself on its extensive pastoral care and wellbeing program, while its co-educational environment is touted as a place where "boys and girls cultivate mutual respect, understanding, and support for one another". "I honestly don't think Wesley is different to any other school," Evans says now. "Wesley is just a microcosm of Australian society. We need to deal with these issues as a societal problem. If other schools are not grappling with the issue, then they need to be, because it's happening."

As well as appointing psychologists to work with students, Wesley has hired consultants to gather baseline data on attitudes about gender and gender-based violence within the student body and examine the efficacy of existing programs. Early findings reveal that girls feel there has been a lack of accountability for perpetrators of harassment or violence, and they want greater consistency from teachers in handling complaints.

"We've also learnt that we need to be targeting resources to our junior and middle schools... to address the normalisation of inappropriate conduct such as jokes about rape or violence," Evans says. "And we need to look at the external activities of

students, particularly drinking, social media use and use of pornography. This is coming from the students, this is what they're telling us."

The question from principals, though, is how much responsibility schools should bear. "Schools are a favourite whipping post," says Tim Hawkes, who served as headmaster of the boys-only The King's School, Parramatta, for 20 years before retiring in 2017. "If there's an identified flaw in society, many are quick to point the finger at schools and either blame them for the problem, or require them to solve the problem."

There is a school of thought that says sex education ought to be a matter for which parents have primary responsibility. Look no further than the Safe Schools initiative, which lost government support in the wake of a community backlash in 2016. Initially promoted as an anti-bullying program for LGBTI kids, its overt promotion of gender and identity politics drew criticism from conservative quarters and Christian groups. Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge is clearly attuned to the sensitivities around sex education. When he recently announced a bundle of new sexual consent resources for schools (including the widely mocked milkshake video) he stressed that teachers would be free to choose learning materials that "reflect the values of their school and their community".

The Australian curriculum, which introduces the concept of relationships and sexuality from Year 3, offers some guidance in the way of teaching consent and is being strengthened as part of a national review. NSW upgraded its PDHPE - (personal development, health and physical education) syllabus several years ago. In the early years, students learn how to describe the meaning of "private" in the context of their own and others' bodies, and to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate touching. By mid-secondary school, lessons explore practices in sexual relationships that enhance safety and contribute to positive experiences, such as negotiating consent and asserting ground rules in relationships.

However, implementation is largely left up to individual schools, which means that what happens in the classrooms can vary significantly. And not surprisingly, students have mixed feelings about the relationships and sex education they receive. In the latest National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health, less than half (40 per cent) of the 83 per cent of students who did the course found it very or extremely relevant. “For many students, the RSE curriculum did not adequately cover sexual health and healthy and diverse relationships in a non-judgmental, affirming manner,” the report says. Some students hinted at teachers being uncomfortable teaching it and a few noted their RSE was “a waste of time” due to “an abstinence-only or religious doctrine approach to the subject”. According to the authors, inadequacy of school-based RSE led students to source information elsewhere, largely the internet and friends. As one 17-year-old female respondent said: “I had to watch porn to understand what exactly sex was.”

“Rape culture reckoning as wave of sexual assault claims unleashed” screamed the headline of a Sydney newspaper on February 26. Child protection organisation Bravehearts’ national training manager Mathew Sinclair isn’t fond of the term “rape culture”, finding it aggressive and unhelpful. And he doesn’t believe that the groundswell of recent allegations necessarily suggests a spike in cases. “What we see occurring here is simply a reflection of what is going on in broader society, and more and more young women gaining the confidence to speak up and call it out,” he says.

Historically, it’s been difficult to get a handle on the true extent of sexual assault, as most victims don’t go to police. But according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, almost one in five women reported having been sexually assaulted or threatened with assault since the age of 15, with more than 90 per cent saying the perpetrator was known to them. Nine out of 10 said they did not report the attack.

Queensland University of Technology researcher Dr Michael Flood has been unsurprised by the revelations of the past few months. “There’s a good body of

research that maps the factors that lead to boys and men perpetrating sexual violence,” he says; it ultimately stems from prevailing attitudes about gender norms that assign men as “dominant”, and women as “submissive” and valued for “being willing to please”.

“This leads to a sexual double standard and male sexual entitlement,” he says. Not all men think this way, says Flood, but those who do, and those who spend a lot of time around other men who do, believe that some degree of coercion, to push against resistance, is normal. Large studies confirm this. The 2017 National Community Attitudes towards Violence against Women Survey found that, among 16-24 year-old Australians, for example, 24 per cent of young men agreed with the statement that “women find it flattering to be persistently pursued, even if they are not interested”, while 14 per cent agreed that “women often say ‘no’ when they mean ‘yes’”.

Of particular concern, however, was the proportion of young people who believed that “when a man is very sexually aroused, he may not even realise that the woman doesn’t want to have sex”. Just under a third of young men, and 27 per cent of young women, agreed with that statement.

Entitlement is a theme running through the 5000-plus testimonies that accompany a petition demanding better consent education, launched by a former Sydney schoolgirl in February. Chanel Contos, a former student of private girls’ school Kambala, was assaulted at 13 by a male friend – “someone I knew and trusted” – who forced her to perform oral sex. Her inexperience and ignorance meant she didn’t register it as a sexual assault at the time. Discussions with girlfriends, often held late at night at sleepovers, confirmed to her that her experience was far from uncommon.

Contos, who is studying for a Masters degree in gender and education in London, originally intended to collect accounts of assault and harassment from her peers to

create dossiers to send to particular schools in the hope they would improve consent education. However, the sheer volume of complaints prompted her to launch a petition online, which quickly went viral and led to the NSW Government pledging to update its curriculum and resources.

“He never took a simple ‘No, not today’ as an answer... He pressured me into it.”

“I had told him that I was a virgin and didn’t want to have sex with him but he pressured me into forplay [sic] and then penetrated me without asking.”

“I woke up to him having sex with me in his bed... I was too scared to do anything so I pretended to be asleep. I left after he fell asleep and couldn’t find my top and had to borrow his shirt. He then harassed me with messages about giving him his f..king shirt back.”

Flood believes it is a stretch to say that many young men commit assault because they don’t quite understand what it means to obtain sexual consent. It’s more likely they don’t value it, he says. “I think the boys and men who would push a girl’s head down onto their groin and do those other things [detailed in the petition], they’re aware it’s not going on with the young woman’s consent,” he says. “Research finds that men mostly do understand the signs of women’s refusals and most women resort to very blunt refusals.”

Until recently I had assumed that gender relations between young people had improved significantly over the years. As an education reporter I was familiar with the push to introduce respectful relationships education into school programs. My own daughters’ primary school has introduced the program, focusing on teaching about positive relationships, empathy and problem-solving skills. I’ve been pleasantly surprised by the emotional literacy my eldest and her friends – all 10-year-olds – are able to demonstrate and the matter-of-fact way they push back against gender stereotypes or hints of sexism.

Our Watch, which has partnered with the Victorian government to develop the Respectful Relationships Education in Schools initiative, endorses a “whole-school” approach, whereby violence prevention is embedded into school policies, staff are supported with professional development and families are involved in creating a culture that promotes gender equality and respect.

The program, which was born out of a push to eradicate domestic violence, is not uncontroversial, given it’s based on an overtly feminist framework; there are concerns that it could demonise young men with its focus on concepts such as “male privilege” and “hegemonic masculinity”. It’s the sort of mindset that likely inspired a Victorian school to request that all its male students, some as young as 12, stand at an assembly to apologise for men’s violence against women – a gesture that was roundly condemned.

Our Watch says there is growing evidence that a holistic, long-term approach is effective in stamping out attitudes that can contribute towards violence against women. Yet evidence of changed behaviours among young men, and ultimately rates of sexual violence, are a long way off. “It is hard to put a time-frame on expected change, but other prevention work has taken a decade or more,” says Our Watch CEO Patty Kinnersly.

New classroom resources launched in April by the federal government contain lessons on sexual consent, including in the context of drugs and alcohol. Students are taught to recognise coercion or manipulation, and to view consent as a complex area in which each individual has responsibility to ensure they are being clear about whether they are giving and receiving consent. “If someone is too intoxicated or affected by other substances to drive, then they are unable to give or gain consent,” students are told. In NSW, law reforms announced late last month will require a person to show they took active steps to ensure a partner agreed – either with words or a gesture – to sexual activity.

When Bravehearts' Sinclair visits schools he finds that older students in particular are well informed on the subject of consent. "They know about the dangers of sexting, for example, as well as the age of consent," he says. "And they can tell you word for word what the law says. What they're looking for, I think, are answers around how to navigate all that in their own relationships."

Unfettered access to technology has dramatically changed the way humans interact. Of particular concern to many educators is the easy access to pornography online. A recent parliamentary inquiry found that by 12 years of age, 28 per cent of kids had viewed porn online. By 16, it was 65 per cent.

Collective Shout director Melinda Tankard Reist fears no amount of school - education will counteract the ferocious impact of pornography, which she describes grimly as "the biggest education department in the world". She singles out the violent genres, including those that depict forced sex. "I have girls who say boys want to ejaculate over their faces on a first date. One girl told me the last few boys she'd been with had all placed their hands around her neck as if to choke her. These behaviours we're seeing are not innate to boys... they're learning this. They're learning that they can get what they want when they want it; that women fantasise about rape. It knocks the empathy right out of them."

Former principal Hawkes says schools cannot face this challenge alone, and implores parents to step up. "In a child's formative years, it is the parents who... set the moral code," he says. "A school's lessons on respect will be completely neutralised if there is domestic violence in the home, foul language in conversation and misogyny."

Katrina Marson is pleased to see the issue on the public agenda, but she's worried that moves to update the school curriculum and roll out new resources on consent could lead to many thinking the job is done. "We need to ensure it is frequent and

valued and delivered to a certain standard, that teachers are trained and parents and communities are being brought into the conversation.”

What she wants most, however, is for the number of women who take a seat inside her office at the DPP to drop dramatically. “There’s a tendency to think that there will always be evil people out there, but this is a problem that is within our power to do something about,” she says. “There’s no magic wand but we can, through comprehensive education, drive those rates of sexual offending down. We definitely can. To sit on our hands and not try, it seems like such a betrayal.”

REBECCA URBAN, NATIONAL EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT

Rebecca Urban is national education correspondent based in Melbourne. She has worked for The Australian since 2008, when she joined the Sydney bureau as a business reporter. Previous roles include business edit... [Read more](#)